

*The Seven Deadly Sins 4: Lust*

Galatians 5:16-26; Matthew 5:27-28

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21 September 2008

Lust. Oh, boy. I'm sure some ministers just love this topic, but out of the seven sins this is probably the one I'm most uncomfortable preaching on. I've got enough of the proverbial puritanical streak not to want to talk about sex in church. Plus it's such a loaded topic. We all know the standard Christian line on this: Lust, bad! Porn, bad! Pre-marital sex, bad! Gay sex, bad! But we in the UCC tend to be a bit more free-thinking and modern. After all, our motto is, "Our faith is over 2000 years old. Our thinking is not." And yet, what *do* we have to say on this topic? Not much, really. We've left it to our more "fundie" brothers and sisters, which does no one a real service.

I'm one of those who thinks Christian history has been too down on sex, to the point of neurosis if not worse. We really have the Roman Catholic Church to thank for that: the idea that celibacy is best, that marriage is better than hell – which isn't much of a recommendation; that married people ought to strive for celibacy or at least only have sex when they want to make a baby. That's an oversimplification, yet not by much. Protestants may have gotten rid of celibacy as a virtue, yet some of that thought remains. Particularly that sex is only good if it's between two straight married people, and that the purpose of sex is to make babies, and any pleasure we get from it is just a side benefit.

Now, I don't particularly agree with that viewpoint, but y'all aren't going to get to hear more on that. I'm not here to advocate for these sins, remember? I'll just say that I take Galatians 5 as my standard. Sure it mentions licentiousness and all that juicy stuff – terms that are rather poorly defined. But more to the point, it discusses the fruits of the spirit: generosity, kindness, patience. And against these, Paul pointedly says, there is no law. So the way I see it, if your relationship bears the fruits of the spirit, then it is blessed. If it bears the fruits of the flesh, jealousy, strife, anger, then it's not blessed. Interpret that how you will.

Still, even saying that, I'm still stuck with lust as a deadly sin. How do I tackle that? Yet as much as it makes me uncomfortable as a minister, if I were in the pews I'd be very interested in what a non-fundamentalist minister would have to say on the topic. So I hope you'll bear with me, and as always I welcome your comments, questions, differing viewpoints, etc.

First, though, let's talk briefly about the corresponding heavenly virtue: celibacy. We Protestants see celibacy as only good insofar as it means saving yourself for your future spouse. But in the early church, celibacy was a good in its own right. Today we see that as pretty messed up, and a lot of people blame Christianity's neurotic obsession with sex on her celibacy kink, but I don't think that's entirely fair. Celibacy in the early church led to a radical empowerment, particularly of women. Consider that everyone in those days, but especially, women, was expected to marry. Women had little or no choice about whom they would marry. They faced a life of total dependence on a husband who could divorce them on a whim. Without reliable birth control or abortion, they faced ongoing pregnancies which either left them bearing an endless line of babies, or even killed them.

Celibacy freed women from that life. They finally had a socially acceptable, even valued alternative to marriage. Celibate women were dependent on no man. They kept healthy, and had time to devote to service projects, work, worship, and even study in a way they never had before. Celibacy granted them status as "honorary men." Today we wouldn't

necessarily see this as feminist, but for the time, it meant that women could enjoy many of the freedoms and status that men had. Since they were no longer sex objects, they could achieve a level of equality with men that was never before possible. Indeed, Christian history gives us many remarkable examples of men and women who enjoyed a close, mutually respectful, platonic friendship that even today is rare. Jerome, who translated the bible into Latin, was a huge advocate of the education of women, and he had several close friendships that scandalized some of his clerical brothers. The famous Francis of Assisi did everything in tandem with his dear friend St. Clare, and the Spanish mystic John of the Cross constantly exchanged letters and consulted with St. Teresa of Avila. Celibacy is what made these friendships possible. It was hardly a feminist utopia, and it's no coincidence that the rise of celibate women's movements occurred hand in hand with the rise of witch hunts. The line between saint and sinner, especially for women, was a very blurry one. But there was and is a value to celibacy that we today do not always credit.

But now, let's get back to lust. I don't have to tell you that sex, especially what is seen as sexual impropriety, has always meant something different for women than for men, and that the consequences for transgressions are vastly different. Then there is the issue of straight sex versus gay sex, as well as people who transcend conventions of gender. For simplicity's sake, I'm going to sex-segregate my sermon, addressing one issue primarily to women and another primarily to men. I'll start with the ladies, since being one myself I have more experience with the topic! And for women, my thoughts on lust have to do with modesty.

In our society, that word screams oppression of women. We have images of *burka*-clad women in Afghanistan, or the pioneer dresses and hairdos of the FLDS women. Certainly modesty has been used as a way to control women. But as our society has cast off the veil, I don't think we've really become more liberated. Or at any rate, our liberation has come at a price, that of the sexual objectification of women.

Just this week I heard a story on the radio about a string of coffee shops with topless *baristas* whipping up the foam on your cappuccino. Needless to say they are a smashing success. One *barista* was interviewed saying she didn't think it was exploitive: she had fun and her customers had fun. That may be so, but still: there are no coffee shops featuring male *baristas* in thongs. Today's revealing and suggestive clothing puts the spotlight on women's bodies and has led to a rise in eating disorders and a negative self-image. Every woman thinks she is fat. These problems are on the rise with men, too, but it's much more strongly felt among women, who feel pressure to have the perfect body. Think also of the suggestive clothing marketed to pre-teen girls. In my day it was Madonna with her *bustiers*. Then it was Britney Spears baring her midriff. Now it's Miley Cyrus, aka Hannah Montana, posing for suggestive photos in Vogue magazine. I have to confess, I'm glad I have a boy!

Now, I'm not talking about enforcing a code of modest dress. The problem with *burkas* is not with the clothing itself, but that women do not have a choice whether to wear it. In fact, using Islam as an example, the standards of modest dress are quite simple: cover the hair, and wear loose clothing that covers the arms and legs. That's it. And the exact same standards apply to men as apply to women. Take a look at these photos. There's no substantial difference between the two outfits. And the purpose of modest clothing in Islam is not repression of sex or protection of women from violation by men, although that may be a side benefit. The purpose, rather, is to honor God – much as Saint Paul himself says on the topic of sex and modesty: your body is a temple of God. Treat it with respect and decorum. That concept continues even down to the present day in our own society, where we would probably all agree that bathing suits are inappropriate attire for church. It's not that you have to dress up, but we do expect you to be more or less covered.

Modest dress means that women choose who gets to see what parts of their bodies, and indeed how they will be viewed as people. Modest dress sends the message that women are more than just objects of sexual desire. If the chest is covered, men are more likely to look above the neck than at the cleavage. Plus, modest dress conceals a lot of what we have been trained to see as the body's "flaws." The point is to emphasize the person, not the body.

Consider that in contrast, men's clothing is still pretty modest by these standards. Long pants and a jacket cover the body, but they can still be very attractive. So men have it much easier when it comes to clothes. However, it is in the imbalance of lust that women are gazed at, and it is men who do the gazing.

Now, Jesus didn't say much about either lust or sex. Perhaps the only time he really tackles the issue directly is this passage in Matthew, and notice that he addresses this teaching exclusively to men and not to women. He's talking about the male gaze, a gaze which objectifies women. Jesus warns that if men so much as look lustfully at a woman, they violate her by making her into a virtual sex object.

Now, I'm not a man and have never lived with a man in that way. I don't regularly discuss the issue of desire with men, so I feel a bit ill-qualified to discuss this. Studies have suggested that men are wired to get turned on visually. I don't know if that's true or not, but I think we can make a distinction between noting that a woman is attractive, and habitually looking at women in terms of whether they are attractive or not. And the principle here is to treat every woman as if she were modestly dressed. In other words, just because a woman is dressed sexily is not license to treat her like a slut. Treat every woman with respect and dignity, as if she were dressed in her Sunday go-to-meeting best. If I have invited women to consider modest dress, then I invite men to consider modest thoughts. Actually, I invite women to do that as well, since women are making inroads into objectifying men as well. It's no better when the gender tables are turned.

Looking then at our model in Jesus, I think we can assume that he was modestly dressed. We also know that he had modest thoughts, because we see how he always treated women with respect and dignity. Even when a prostitute was washing his feet with her hair – and I'm sure there are porn websites dedicated to that exact fetish – even then he did not respond to her with lust, but rather he saw her as a person.

I also look to the example of his platonic friendship with women, especially with Mary Magdalene and the sisters Mary and Martha. Granted, some folks have speculated that those relationships may not have been platonic at all, that Mary Magdalene in particular may have even been his wife. But that is just speculation. In both the text itself and in tradition, these relationships are portrayed as platonic friendships, and what we see is that Jesus treated them with respect and dignity, as equals.

In summary, then, that's what I think this issue of lust is all about. History is full of examples of exploitation and oppression when it comes to sex. It's a history that's still very much a part of our modern world. What's deadly about lust, then, is the way we use sex to manipulate and use others. So let us follow Jesus' example of treating one another and ourselves with modesty. Not because sex is evil, but because our bodies are temples of God, and each of us is made in God's most holy image, an image to be revered and not tarnished.